

Mary Wheeler, Paducah's Songcatcher

Mary Wheeler (1892–1976), born in Paducah to well-known attorney Charles Wheeler, dedicated her life's work to teaching music and documenting traditional Kentucky songs. As one of the first career women in her hometown, Wheeler spent her life teaching and performing music. She spent one year (1926-1927) teaching music at the Hindman Settlement School where she meticulously documented traditional music from the school's students and local Knott County residents. She later published "Kentucky Mountain Folk Songs" (1937) which reflected back on this early research.



While teaching music at the Paducah Junior College in the 1930s, Wheeler began work on her master's thesis, focusing on traditional music of the Ohio River after noticing the paddle boats and river life of her childhood disappearing. In 1939 she published "Roustabout Songs: A Collection of Ohio River Valley Songs" which depicted riverboat life along the Ohio River. This work focused primarily on music from the black laborers who loaded cargo and has since contributed heavily to the study of traditional music and the crossover influence to popular music of the period, including country music and jazz. The lyrics from this study were transcribed in dialect and reflected a time period which many preferred to ignore, a driving force for Wheeler's intense documentation.

Wheeler's final publication, "Steamboatin' Days: Folk Songs of the River Packet Era" (1944) looked at the history of the steamboat on the Ohio, Mississippi and Tennessee rivers.

Oral history interviews with and about Mary Wheeler can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>. (Photo courtesy of McCracken County Public Library)

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